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Exploring passionate people

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Abstract:

The notions of passionate people in organisations are heavily influenced by two dominating but very different perspectives in motivational research. In this paper these two perspectives are described as Utopia and Dystopia. Both of them are inaccurate and telling only half the story. With J.G. March's theory of exploration and exploitation, and comparative case studies conducted in a VBM-company and a voluntary association, the paper reframes the view upon organisational conditions for passionate people. The conclusion is that a vigorous and inclusive culture and a bottom up production of values, empowers organizational members to create their own value based discipline, which can give the individual passion a direction.

In this paper I will address the following question:

What are the organizational conditions for passionate people in highly formalized organisations¹?

This can be seen as a classical question in the theory of intrinsic motivation. Passion or drive is an unavoidable aspect of intrinsic motivation. But how is passion transformed into motivation in an organizational setting?

Several organisational researchers (Jackson & Carter 2000; Czarniawska 1997; Dahl 2002; Sennett 1999; Andersen & Born 2001) claims that we have a new organisational life today, where formal hierarchies have been broken down, organisations become open networks, and formal leaders has lost their natural authority. In this view passionate people becomes the *heroes* of the organisation, by trusting their inner personal authority. They are the ones who act with courage, when crises occur (Hirschhorn 2003:19).

But is this really the full and true notion of passionate people in today's organizational life? In that case passionate people would always be seen as the heroes of the organisations. But sometimes they are also seen as the villains. In this view passionate people are the fundamentalists, who put the organisation in danger because of their foolish actions. Sometimes formal organisation decreases the space for passionate behaviour, and sometimes with great reason. This paper is an attempt to map some of these 'casting'-dynamics in highly formalized organisations.

First I will present two very distinct views upon passionate people in organisations. But since none of them in my opinion catches the full perspective, I will reframe the view buy the help of Karl E. Weick's theory of sense making and J.G. March's theory of exploration and exploitation. The next part of the paper present two case studies I have conducted, called '*The VBM-company*' and '*The voluntary association*'. Finally I will discuss the conclusions of the two case studies in the light of March's and Weick's theories.

¹ The term 'passionate people' refers to the Danish concept 'ildsjæle' (souls of fire).

Organizational conditions

When it comes to the organizational conditions of passionate people there are two very different perspectives that dominate the field of motivation theory. The two discourses I have named Utopia and Dystopia.

Utopia: living the corporate values

According to the utopia there are a growing number of passionate people in today's organizational life. Originally rooted in *the actor-oriented perspective* of sociology, Abraham Maslow and the concept of self-actualisation has been a strong inspirational source for what can be called the utopian HRM-movement. In this perspective motivation is seen as a source within the individual. We could name it energy, need or drive, and in a more radical actor-perspective it has got nothing to do with the society the person is born into. Instead it comes from the very nature of the individual (Maslow 1992; 2000). Following this all human beings are born with a passionate life force, and management can only motivate them by building the right environment around them. Or they can be recruited for the right task (passionate people match work you need to feel passionate about to succeed). The ideal is that organisational life, routines, praxis and values should be meaningful for both employee and organisation (Graversen & Holt Larsen 2004: 222- 231; Bovbjerg 2001; 2003).

Today concepts as Value based management (VBM), corporate social responsibility (CSR), triple bottom line (TBL), branding, storytelling and 'self-management' can be connected to utopian HRM. In this view it is possible to attract people by providing them with a meaningful identity in a value based community. Organizational culture can be rationalized to serve the goals and values of the organization. Passionate people are the ideal type citizens of this community (Peters & Waterman Jr. 1984). Passionate people are living the values of the organization.

Strategy is a central concept in utopian HRM-thinking. It is believed that management can predict action and plan the road to desired goals. This is an ideology based upon the possibilities of formal organisation. According to the utopian perspective we must 'humanise' the elements of inhuman, cold life in the highly formalized organisations through enhanced formalization.

Dystopia: designer employees

According to the dystopian view the number of passionate people in today's organizational life is decreasing. Rationalisation is the poison of passion. Passion disappears when the instrumental technologies of formal organization set focus upon emotions and personal identity.

Rooted in *the structure-oriented perspective* of sociology the Dystopia sees motivation as a result of *external* forces. Motivation is the expression of a higher structural power (Miller and Rose 1990). In a radical view this perspective would even deny the existence of personal will. There is no single source, either in human beings or in society from where the energy floats. Neither money nor 'saving the whales'-values can be seen as *the* single source of motivation. When following the structure perspective, researchers are more interested in how we create concepts like motivation, enthusiasm or passion, than how managers are able to meet innate needs. In this view passionate people are a construction, a kind of 'designer employee' (Casey 1995), or a rationalistic attempt to fulfil the management dream of well-disciplined personnel.

Following the perspective of Catherine Casey (1995; 2004) the humanization of the organisation might as well be a strategic move from what she calls the neo-rationalistic management-organisation. Humanization as a counter-praxis to the rationalistic organisation can just as well be a cover for the same (Casey 2004:74)

Other sociologists see similar tendencies in macro-structural changes. According to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck the future of the labour market can be described in terms of "Brazilianisation". The future of work can be studied in Brazil, he claims. Here the labour market consists of nomads of work that switch between different fields of activity, forms of occupation and types of educations. The idea of classical fulltime, lifelong occupation and carrier is dead. What we get instead is a risk society. Modern man must live under unavoidable faith of risk, coursed by technology, politics, markets failures etc. (Beck 2002; 1997:10).

This risk society can also be described as a regime of flexibility, with the words of Richard Sennett (1999). What we see is a negative effect upon our ability to experience motivation in organisational settings. We witness the corrosion of character in modern work environments. Actually, the constantly changing job environments, the network and project organisations should free us from

the destructiveness of lasting routines and meaningless bureaucratic control, and help us realize our own authentic self. But according to Sennett we become the slaves of uncertainty instead.

The critical sociologists Casey, Beck and Sennett in my opinion describe the same dystopian development: the decline of classic formal organization and the rise of the neo-rationalistic or flexible organisation, which suppress employees through uncertainty and risk regime.

Passionate people as explorers

I put forward that neither of the two perspectives is the right one upon the organisational conditions for passionate people.

From the structure-oriented Dystopia perspective we can learn that social relations and encounters play a huge role in sense making and following this the individual creation of values, goals and self-identity – in other words who we are and what the aim of our passion is. But the perspective puts to much weight upon the ability of formal organisation.

From the actor-oriented Utopia perspective we can learn that neither organisational culture nor individuals can be fully rationalized by formal organisation. People are not puppets in the theatre of structure. There *are* such categories as personal will and individual goal, and people *do* have the ability to reflect upon their own motivation (Giddens 2002; Layder 1997; 2004). Organizational life inhibits pockets of unmanaged territories, where symbolic expressions like slang, nicknames, jokes, irony, sarcasm and imagination can express a relative degree of independence. As Yiannis Gabriel says:

”I will propose that there is within every organization an uncolonized terrain that is not and cannot be managed, in which people, both individually and in groups, can engage in all kinds of unsupervised, spontaneous activity. These activities occasionally engage with the practices of power, in unpredictable or indirect ways. I will refer to this terrain as the unmanaged organization, a kind of organizational dreamworld dominated by desires, anxieties and emotions” (Gabriel 2000:112).

The relationship between individual and organization is therefore basically a loose-coupled order.

J.G. March presents us with a perspective that takes this into account. In his view passion is a social construction, where action and interpretation is seen as two different levels of the organisation. You can be passionate without reflecting upon your passion. You can reflect upon passion, without being passionate. Preferences, goals, values and motives are created through action. There are several, competing sets of inconsistent preferences and goals at stake at the same time (March 1995:29; March & Olsen 1976).

Following March formal organisation only have ceremonial value. Organisations creates a loose coupling between the formal structures (like bureaucratic control mechanisms) and informal parts of the organisation (what is actually doing the job). For exterior use the organisation performs a play of connections, causality and clear goals. But inside we find a chaotic environment. In the loose-coupled organisation there is no such thing as given features and clear information. Instead of rational organisations we have loose-coupled organisations nurturing the myth of rationality (see also Meyer & Rowan 1991).

In my perspective passion derives from the ability to create and maintain a value oriented self-identity, as well as from the ability to influence the sense making processes of the organisation. Passionate people creates and pursue whatever they find essential, in other words what they believe contains value. This follows the concept of sense making (Weick 1979; 2003). Passionate people often provide meaning, which is necessary in a rather chaotic organizational environment. In this sense you could say that passionate people adds a soft discipline to the liquid social dynamics of the organization. But passionate people can also be characterized by convictions that are in opposition to the expectations of the rest of the organisation. In this sense they often break the traditions, habits and routines of formal organisation.

These two types of action correspond with two types of organisational logic, described by J.G. March: exploration (play, experiments, change, innovation and breaking routines) and exploitation (consolidation, efficiency, production, formal rules, habits, traditions and routines) (March 1991; 2006:155).

The one logic will often dominate the other. But both types of logic are important. Organisations engaged in exploration will experience the expensive costs of experimentation, without gaining any of its benefits. New ideas are often bad ideas or they are not unique enough. Organizations engaged

in exploitation will be having trouble finding new products, new ways of communicating and trouble finding new partners. In short: exploitation is the logic of action of formal organisation.

The aim is to find an appropriate balance between the two logics – in explicit decisions as well as in implicit choice of habits, routines, criteria of success, creation of goals and legitimate values (March 2006:156).

March argues that fast learning (such as socialisation to corporate values), is not always best for organisational success. On the other hand slow learning makes exploration possible. Organizations with slack are slow at pressing corporate values down the throat of their employees, and by this slow socialisation they will enhance the possibility to be successful.

March points out that it is the *different* capabilities (what the recruits know is not the same) that create the new learning processes of the organisation. Recruits with the same background, same education, same values etc. will reduce the organizations ability to learn something new.

The theory of exploration-exploitation can be said to describe a central aspect of the organisational conditions for passionate people. Passionate people that goes exploring behave 'out of order', so to speak, they are breaking routines, in the attempt of pursuing personal values. There must be an appropriate number of them. If there are too many or too few of them, the organisation becomes self-destructive.

Empirical examples

To valid my discussion of this perspective I will present two empirical examples, taken from case studies I have conducted: The VBM (Value Based Management)-company and The Voluntary Association.

Case 1: The VBM-corporation

The VBM-corporation is a huge, high profiled company. The case study takes place among employees occupied with human resource, recruitment, corporate branding etc. Much of the work in the company is dominated by tough demand of documentation, measurement of personal

performance etc. In that sense the company lives up to the traditional concept of instrumental rationality.

The official motivational rhetoric of the company is loose coupled. This loose coupling is for example evident in the slogans “We can make a difference” (but how great a difference, and what kind of difference?). Or “our story shows that it can be done” (but what exactly is it that the story shows that can be done?)

Managers can use this loose coupling in their sense making, depending upon the situation they are in. Also employees are able to use this loose coupling in their own daily motivational processes, as a way to deal with a very stressful job where they negotiate the borders of their engagement and loyalty to the company. You could say that they are to some extent able to spin the storytelling concepts provided by the company in their own interest. The degrees of freedom do not just find its way in the motivational sense making processes, but can also be traced in employee practice. As one of the employees says about the tough demands of documentation: “...I have tried to sit with these documents [procedures of production], and I move the pages, but read nothing.”

What we see is an organisation more or less without subcultures. Though top management tries to connect the organisation through value-based management (CSR), the motivation is still highly individualistic. The personal meetings in the organisations therefore shift between suitable interest and lack of debate – side by side with occasional moments of strong and very emotional debate of values and corporate identity.

Employees seem to experience more trouble than freedom with this loose-coupled environment. It is a common expectation among the employees that managers must provide the clarity and meaningfulness of the work. But managers do not – or are not in most cases able to fulfil this expectation. The employees report of several stories of personal breakdowns caused by stress.

One of the employees describes the company as a de facto political organization that creates winners and losers. He describes the winners as “political animals” and the losers as the ones that cannot work without clear goals, or get frustrated by the lack of given meaning.

Though there is a great deal of truth in this rather cynical view, the case study also shows that employees are able to create and maintain humanity and solidarity in interactions, where self confidence is at stake. The fellow colleagues may even be better at doing this, than the rather specialised professional managers of the company.

Case 2: The voluntary association

The voluntary association makes the impression of a rather open and broad organization. The association has strong values of egalitarianism; everybody should be welcomed to join. It has a formal democratic structure that the members hold dear, though it is easy to find examples that you can suspend this structure, if you have a high level of activity. Action is responded with recognition.

In the daily rhetoric we quickly become aware of two groups – the employees and the volunteers. It is understood that it is the employees that are doing the professional work. But instead of dividing the organisation into employees and volunteers we can observe three other roles among the organizational members – each with their own script of motivation:

The stable group

To the stable group there is a connection between loyalty and the investment of time. The longer you stay the more loyal you are. They see the association as a place for social gathering. They do take some responsibility, but they do it with modesty. They prefer small and well-defined challenges. They see themselves as helpers, and do not take any kind of leadership upon their shoulders. They are the majority, and if they do not like the dominant attitudes of the progressive group, they can leave.

The progressive group

Members of the progressive group see themselves as the heroes of the association, but in fact they depend very much on the large group of stable members. Having a progressive self-understanding, and having a formal title like chairman or president of a committee is closely linked. But the progressive group doesn't speak that much about titles. Rhetorically and in praxis they must exercise a degree of egalitarianism. In doing so it becomes a sign of their high status that they don't speak about it. The progressive group takes responsibility. Formal leadership is their sign of commitment.

The flexible group

The members of the flexible group also see themselves as a kind of heroes, but they reject the recognition from the rest of the association, and aim to get their need of recognition satisfied outside the association. There seems to be very few of them – or maybe they are just hard to spot, because they can easily slip into the roles of heroes and helpers for a short while. But they don't want to be recognized as either heroes or helpers. First and foremost they want to be themselves, and no one else. They do not want to be an object of role casting, and they don't like social expectations towards their behaviour. In that sense we can see them as *routine-breakers*. With no social expectations and basically no legitimacy, the flexible group lives a risky organizational life – the others will most likely meet them with disrespect. But in many cases they also meet respect based on the 'everybody is welcome'-value and their high level of activity.

Discussion

Both organisations are large, formalised organisations. The internal complexity of both organisations creates an ambiguous environment, where connections between actions, goals, means and values can be seen as loose coupled. But there are also some important differences between the corporation and the voluntary association.

The association has a very inclusive culture. It is the meeting place for young and old people, academic scholars as well as blue colour workers, and it is very easy to access. You only need your passion for doing voluntary work. The corporation is a place for mostly middle-aged professionals, all with academic middleclass background. It is relatively difficult to access. An academic background or like is needed, and you must adopt a sense of being among the best in your field.

According to March the higher heterogeneity of the association should create better conditions for passionate people. But while the corporation seems to be too homogenous, you could in fact discuss if the culture of the association is *too* inclusive, creating a lack of conflict and emotional tension. If that is the case the association's virtue of open-mindedness is a charade for cynical negligence. But empirical findings from the association show that this is not completely so. In the personal meetings the heterogeneity seems to slow down the speed of a potential strong socialisation, grounded in

traditional values. To some extent it opens up the organisation to the flexible group, or in fact the passionate people.

In the corporation they spend a lot of energy searching for order, clarity, rationality – or meaning. The management is often being blamed for not providing this clarity. The same search is not that important in the voluntary association. And they don't blame their management – either the political elected leaders or the administrative leaders. Why is it so?

With the VBM-concept the management of the corporation tries to create a kind of tight organisational culture known from smaller innovative organisations. Through the value based management concept the management of the corporation articulate values and meanings for any occasion. In fact you could say that management provides whatever meaning your heart could desire. This is clearly a formal strategy in the attempt to rationalize organisational culture. But the management are in fact over-communicating their messages, and in doing so they only succeed to make a lot of the employees more insecure. By setting people free from formal hierarchy they are creating of value based community, where people are put under pressure from a formal top down value-production. Instead of creating more exploration, the corporation actually creates more exploitation. This leads to frustrations and stress among the employees in the attempt to meet the changing and unclear expectations of their managers. What is created in the personal meetings is instead profound idealism, cynicism or disbelief.

The problem of the corporation is not bureaucratic negligence. The problem is that there are too many meanings to consider. The problem is confusion. You don't need more information, when the situation is overwhelmed with ambiguity. Instead you need values, priorities and clarity about preference and what really matters (Weick 1995:27).

But where should this clarity come from? In the VBM-company the answer is crystal clear: From the managers. The corporation maintains a myth of hierarchical leadership, though the VBM-concept should have changed that. The result is frustration, pain and disappointment, when the managers don't meet the expectations of the employees. Passion takes the form of pain in the individualistic struggle with the corporate bureaucracy. In this organization the idea of empowerment and creation of values from the bottom of the organization is weak in praxis.

The association has a more vital culture, where values and ideas come from many places.

The volunteers know that their organisation is a political organisation. It is legal to speak out against dominant behaviours and decisions. They have the right to say no, and still pursue their own notion of passion, yet being a part of the organization. It is a freedom they don't share in the corporation. What matters here are the expectations of their managers.

In the association there is a culture of disagreeing and ways of handle conflicts. The volunteers are in that sense empowered. They are even free to ignore the formal democratic structure for some time which prevents the formal organisation from being formalistic. Traditional values may dominate, but it is not a regime, that excludes new or more individualistic values or activities.

Passionate people have better conditions in the voluntary association. In the association the enactment of values becomes a main product of the personal meetings. It is not expected to come from the top of the organisation. The individual volunteer experience an ability to change the world and reality of which they take part. The volunteers are able identify a broader range of values, goals and means, and they can create a bottom up production of values. The sense making processes of the corporation lacked this perspective.

The importance of tradition

March's perspective could lead us to the conclusion that a low degree of organizational formalisation (less exploitation) is better for passionate people. The importance of formal organisation upon passion is low or could even be negative. But is this completely true? Is formal organization or in fact tradition really that bad?

You could claim that organisations all over the world for the last generation has learned about the 'evilness' of nurturing tradition and exploitation as well the blessings that comes from nurturing exploration and innovation. Organisational leaders have actually tried to implement this view through network- or project organisations, enhanced flexibility and strategic changes. In the view of Casey, Beck and Sennett it has contributed to a path towards the breakdown of culture and individual spirit. But is the rise of 'the exploring organisation' the only way to secure individual passion? Or is it in fact the root of a cynical, flexible risk regime in modern work life?

Does formal organization and tradition still play a role in the creation of passion, or is it just an expression of rationalistic formalism that imprisons all organisational members in a modern version of the Weberian iron cage? Maybe Richard Sennett has got a point here: The stability of routines of classic formal organisation can reinforce self-identity and thereby create better conditions for passionate people? According to March the answer is clearly no! That would be the same as surrender to the rationalistic institution.

This is actually a dilemma of Cartesian anxiety: Either we have a stable fundament of knowledge, or else we cannot escape the darkness of chaos and confusion. As Karl Weick notices, people need the thought that the world has given features and clear information. If they gave up the thought of the world as a stable place, they would fall down in idealism, nihilism or subjectivism (Weick 1995:37).

There may not be a clear philosophic answer to this dilemma, but the case of the association shows us that there is a practical answer: The flexible group is the explorers of the organisations. But the enactment of traditional values, the core values or in fact the borders of the formal organisation, which is sustained by the stable group of the voluntary association, makes it possible to identify this kind of flexible behaviour.

What we must understand here, studying the organisational conditions of passion, are the complex relations between people with stable (traditional) routine-maintaining behaviour and people with individualistic routine-breaking behaviour. This is a key to understand passion-driven organizational change. The example of the association shows us the potential in identifying the borders of the organisation; the borders passionate people are trying to break in the attempt to satisfy their own dreams and visions. But they cannot pursue the aims and values of their own individual passion without knowing that there is someone else in the organisation that will disagree with them. Passion needs an appropriate amount of resistance. In other words: You can't go explore, if you don't know the borders you have to cross.

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